Cheryl Serpentine, “The Production and Consumption of Popular Culture: A Community Study,” 12-13-98

Like the pieces of a mosaic, popular culture practices embody a series of different yet, overlapping elements through which unique traditions emerge. For most Americans, popular culture is the way of life in which, and by which, the dominant society lives. As Ray Brown defines it, "popular culture is the everyday culture of a group, large or small, of people." He contends that, in a democracy like the United States, "popular culture is the voice of the people- their practices, likes and dislikes- the lifeblood of their daily existence" (Brown 23). When looking at American popular cultural studies, however, it is important to consider that there are unlimited demonstrations of cultural behavior dictated by history, race, ethnicity, custom, gender, age, locality and group-size conditions. While most would confine the 'popular' aspects of cultural practices to the dominant, it is also important to consider the alternative cultural narratives that have emerged as hybrids from within the margins of American society. Although these cultural elements make up a much smaller component than those of the dominant society, they are uniquely relevant in explaining and emphasizing the fragmentary nature of American popular culture and the extent to which the 'popular' has conditioned and contested the formation of social spaces.

Because of their exclusion from political power, cultural recognition, mass communication and popular culture, ethnic minorities and immigrants have played an important role in shaping the American post-modem aesthetic for decades. These exclusions, while often generating marginal states of consciousness among minorities, have contributed to the development of 'historical blocs' of oppositional groups. These 'historical blocs'- united by common ideas, dreams, intentions and alienating experiences- signify the fragmentary nature of the post modem sensibility and display the importance of the many overlapping and inter working popular cultures of American society. (Lipsitz 152).

While popular culture studies have embraced a wide definition of culture, and have resisted any particular set of theories and methodologies, ghettos, barrios and border zones have been the setting for most texts that examine the popular culture of minority groups in United States (Cawelti 5). When immigrants and ethnic minorities assemble in these urban communities, they often settle as ethnic groups and are surrounded by other marginal clusters. Because such communities share with each other similar experiences of alienation on the margins of society, they have produced similarly apparent, yet alternative narratives, influenced by their conflicting desires to challenge ideological hegemony and/or conform to the mainstream of mass popular culture. "Neither assimilationist nor separatist, these groups drew upon 'families of resemblance'

similarities to the experiences and cultures of other groups- to fashion a unity of disunity" (Lipsitz 136).

While urban enclaves and border zones portray the very fragmentary nature of popular culture, it is also essential to consider the existence of ethnic minorities that have migrated, immigrated and settled among less diverse communities. Examining the popular culture of immigrants among rural and suburban communities throughout the United States also displays the unique processes by which ethnic minorities adapt to the popular cultural practices of the dominant society.

As a participant in the 1998 American Mosaic Semester at Dickinson College, I had the opportunity to examine and explore the narratives of a largely Hispanic immigrant farm community in rural Pennsylvania. Participating in this intensive community study gave me the opportunity to investigate the history and discourse of both local and national migrant farm labor and immigration, as well as the opportunity to conduct field work among the local Hispanic working class community. By spending a substantial amount of time with the workers and families, what I discovered was a remarkably unique culture that has undergone much transformation, yet retained much cultural tradition upon migrating to and/or settling in a more homogeneous community in the United States.

Driving south on Route 34 from Carlisle, one can help but notice the miles of extensive fruit orchards that make up the vast agricultural landscape of Central Pennsylvania's Adam's County. As one is conscious of this aesthetically pleasing landscape, rarely does one consider the narratives that lie behind the scenes. Farmers and workers have toiled and labored in the fields of Adams County since the beginning of the century growing, harvesting, picking and processing fruits such as apples, peaches, cherries and pears. However, within the last few decades the majority of this agricultural labor has been imported.

For years foreign workers have been coming to Pennsylvania for seasonal labor, and Adams County, which has been deemed the Apple Capital of the United States, is reliant upon such labor for a large portion of its productivity. A largely growing population of Hispanic workers have been migrating to the area for both seasonal, temporary and permanent work in both the fields and factories of Adams County's rural communities. While Mexican males make up the majority of this growing immigrant population, they are also accompanied by other Latin Americans, Puerto Ricans, Haitians and Jamaicans. In order to better understand the experience of migrant workers, it first is necessary to consider the history and discourse of farm labor as well as the circumstantial conditions that cause these Hispanics to migrate to this country.

Towns such as York Springs, Idaville, Aspers, Biglerville, Ardentsville and Gettysburg are among the many communities in Adams County that have

transformed as a result of this surge of foreign labor. These migrants--part of the largest wave of immigration this country has seen since the early part of this century-- are transforming industries and fueling the area's economy even as they are exploited by long hours, harsh conditions and back breaking work. As a consumer culture, we tend to take for granted the hard work that must be invested in such an industry, and additionally, most Americans fail to realize that a large portion of this labor is done by immigrant and migrant workers.

Immigrants may flock to certain occupations because of skills brought from their homelands, shifts in local economics and community networks. Many immigrants, especially those who can't speak English well, have chosen occupations with little public contact, such as factory or field work, simply to support families here and back home. These laborers can earn as much as seven to ten times more in the United States than in Mexico. Once a few immigrants progress in particular industries, informal networks take over. Generally, people get jobs through relatives and end up concentrated or in particular occupations or niches. Many of the workers come to the United States for temporary or seasonal labor, but often end up staying for several years or settling permanently because of the economic advantages. This has largely been the case in Adams County, as many migrants have decided to stay and settle in the area. As these immigrants decide to stay and settle among the dominant Anglo communities, they are forced to cope with fragmented lifestyles, torn between their native culture and a new culture that many feel rejects them.

It is apparent in Adams County that, for the most part, the migrants are viewed as outsiders by the larger society. In York Springs, for example, (which many residents have nicknamed 'Tijuana Springs') I sensed a deep animosity toward Mexicans from several residents and local store owners. The owner of the hardware store claimed that he was losing business from his regular customers because the store was always overcrowded with too many Mexicans. Another merchant claimed that the Mexicans were always drinking and causing trouble, often leaving the scent of marijuana lingering in the air. Several residents told me about a soccer field that was condemned because the Mexicans apparently trashed it.

While not all residents of Adams County have negative views about the immigrant population, it is obvious that certain hostilities and stereotypes prevail. Many members of the dominant society feel that these immigrants have an adverse effect on the quality of American life, disrupting the community, causing financial burdens such as welfare, healthcare, court and jail costs. These and many other stereotypes, formed by media coverage, political discourse and race relations, have shaped complex and contradictory attitudes about migrants and immigrants throughout history. The reality, however, is that these immigrants do work most Americans will no longer do, bringing with

them a profound work ethic, and a considerable contribution to the general productivity and welfare of the country (Chavez 22).

As an intern at a local social service center for migrant education, I had the opportunity to encounter and interact with these individuals on a daily basis teaching GED, ESL, art and photo-journalism classes. Many of the acquaintances I made in the first few weeks eventually turned into strong friendships, and I discovered that each Mexican immigrant, whether documented or not, had experienced the fragmentary nature of the post-modem condition on a daily basis.

As the students= language improved day by day, and we were able to communicate on a more open level, I noticed the gradual cultural adaptations that were taking place, particularly among those who had made conscious decisions to remain in the United States. Those who settled and learned the language adapted to American popular cultural practices to a much greater degree than more recent immigrants and those who couldn't speak English. The assimilation of Mexicans into American society was evident in language preference, adoption of common attitudes and values, popular culture, membership in common social groups and institutions, and loss of separate political, religious or ethnic identification. Ethnicity was not a fixed set of customs surviving from life in Mexico, but rather a collective identity that emerged from daily experience in the United States. Accepting this new ethnic identity is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of the immigrant lifestyle.

As Leo Chavez and George Sanchez explain in the novels about Mexican American migration, immigrants and socially mobile individuals appear culturally invisible because they are no longer what they once were and not yet what they could become (Sanchez 11). Because a portion of the larger society does not consider these immigrants as part of the community, many never feel fully incorporated into the society. When a person or a cultural group is cut off from its own feelings, personal sources and institutions they are also cut off from their creative depths. For ethnic minorities, failure to assimilate into dominant cultures can bring exclusion from vital economic and political resources, but successful assimilation can annihilate prized traditions and customs essential to individual and collective identity (Lipsitz 134). While some immigrants have gained an identity by holding onto a past, others have attempt to forget their past by assimilating to the dominant culture, both creating a fragmented sense of reality. Regardless of their intentions to adapt American popular culture practices, it is inevitable that representations and images of America will be instilled upon each immigrant to a certain extent.

Mexican and Hispanic Americans are constantly faced with a culture much different than Mexico or Latin America. Their new realities are structurally defined by institutionally enacted capitalist principles, and they must respond to them in their everyday life and experience. By accepting the real, "objective"

world of others, immigrants dependently link themselves to the host group. In this case they have become who they are by being interdependent with others. Migrating between two countries--one highly industrialized and the other severely impoverished-- Mexican immigrants have experienced the fragmentary nature of the post-modem condition (Sanchez 9).

I have found that, particularly, in the case of the undocumented, men may live and work on the same farm, seldom leaving the property. In such cases they do not have much contact with the dominant society, and thus, they are not exposed to the same degree of socialization as those that have gained legal status or have settled with families. For a number of isolated immigrants, much of their connection with the dominant society comes from what they view in the media. Others who feel socially excluded from the community, have formed identities that cling to life in Mexico. Through popular music, clothing, images, icons, leisure religion and rituals, some have reinforced the popular cultural ideals of their native land while others have blended ethnic and cultural practices. Through specific popular culture, Mexican and Mexican-American immigrants have exhibited the very fragmentary nature of their transition and incorporation into American

society.

More than almost any other aspect of life, religion threaded itself into the fabric of village life in Mexico. The local Catholic church was a cornerstone of community stability, invariably located in the central plaza (Sanchez 152). Upon migrating to the United States, Mexicans and Mexican Americans have been faced with a starkly different religious perspective. Masses are spoken in English, which inhibits Spanish speakers from participating. Catholic religious practices have increasingly narrowed in participation and have become less of a community celebration and more a set of rituals performed at home. While there may be a religious picture in every room of the immigrants house, they will seldom be seen at the religious services at the parish (Sanchez 166). Nearly all of the men in my class had pictures of la Virgin de Guadalupe in their wallets, in their cars, around their necks, and even on their clothing. Driving with one of the men, I was surprised to see so many religious icons and symbols in his car: rosary beads, holy cards, dried palm, and images of the virgin on his ceiling and key chain. Most explain that although their church attendance is limited, they still pray to the Virgin daily for protection.

In addition to a decrease in church attendance among Mexican immigrants, other traditions such as Catholic religious celebrations and rituals have also changed in the United States. In terms of popular culture, many immigrants emphasize the importance of Mexican fiestas and rituals which provided much of the framework for socialization in their native towns. It is not uncommon to hear Mexican immigrants raving about such celebrations, ritual performances and rites of passage such as Quinceneras, (fifteenth birthday parties that mark

the transition from female adolescence to adulthood), Day of the Dead and Mexican Independence Day. During such celebrations the entire community is invited to enjoy the food, dancing and loud music. Such fiestas are common every weekend in Mexico, sometimes lasting days at a time, whereas in the United States they only occur on special occasions. Mexican immigrants often express nostalgia for these fiestas, as there is no comparison in the United States. For many members of the second generation, the traditions performed in the United States are their only connection to life in Mexico. Instead of being held in private homes and on the streets as they are in Mexico, many immigrants must rent out halls to hold their festivities. One Mexican American male told me a story of how his friends family was denied use of a rental hall because they had a bad experience with the last group of Hispanics that rented it out. However, when his American wife called back to request the hall, they immediately rented it to her.

Another aspect that plays an enormous role in the lives of Mexican and Latin Americans is the family, both nuclear and extended. In fact, one of the major determinants for Mexican migration to the United States involves a desire to improve the economic situation of the family. Most of the workers who have settled alone send large portions of their pay home to their families, or save enough money so that they can send their family across the border too.

Families that settle in the United States are exposed to a variety of circumstances that call for change in the traditional Mexican household. For adolescents and teenagers, lack of parental authority can lead to new freedom in dating patterns and marriage as well as Mexican values. Whereas in Mexico it was unacceptable to marry or date out of one's ethnic group, such practices have become more and more common among Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States. Several immigrants mentioned that after arriving in the United States, their views on inter-ethnic relationships had changed. Marital ties with outside groups have become more common with those more culturally assimilated into American society. American popular culture and mass media texts such as commercials, movies, television sitcoms, soaps operas, and popular magazines are examples of cultural transmitters that shape certain beliefs among these newcomers by conveying the dominant ideals encompassing gender roles, friendship, romance, and expressive cultural style. Because we live in a society that ceaselessly appropriates and shapes our everyday cultural or communicative practices, Americans are gradually conditioned to absorb these mass mediated cultural forms.

Another apparent change among those who have migrated to Adams County can be seen in their clothing style. Many have adopted popular American styles and name brand labels that have been spotlighted by the media. It is common to see these Mexicans Americans wearing designer labels such as Polo Sport, Tommy Hilfiger, and Nautica as well as popular sports and leisure logos such as Nike and Adidas. Many of the men often wear baseball caps and clothing

monogrammed with NFL, NHL and NBA insignia. The transition from traditional Mexican styles of clothing is apparent as many have exchanged cowboy hats and boots for baseball caps and sneakers. Additionally other uniquely American emblems such as Disney and popular cartoon characters are prevalent among the children. Enacting mainstream cultural ideals by wearing such labels has reified group identity. While these immigrants are attempting to create an outer image, the underlying social processes are hidden by such commodities.

While it is obvious that many of these immigrants have bought into popular American fashion trends, many blend them with styles that are uniquely Mexican. These expressive styles represent the overlapping and fragmentary elements of popular culture because they merge alternative and shared identities. While Mexicans have historically displayed styles that symbolize identification with marginality and have intentionally flaunted their alienation from the dominant society through images of opposition, it is apparent that today's immigrant population has combined these alternative styles with the popular culture of the dominant society.

Such a combination is considerably displayed by the popularity of automobiles and electronic equipment among Mexican immigrants. As one worker explained in a photo essay, "Many people dream of having a good looking car; new, sophisticated and with a powerful motor and also good sound system. It is the dream of young people, but sometimes we can't buy what we want because of our economic situation; we have to be happy with what we have." Owning a car allows one to search for action and live a more independent and autonomous lifestyle. Additionally, many see their cars as a valued personal possession. Because the image of a car has come to reflect a particular identity, the way each car is customized, decorated and displayed mirrors the personality of the individual behind the wheel.

Electronic and musical devices and equipment are similarly important in forging the identity of the immigrant worker. Loud speakers and high tech sound systems also convey the notion of overlapping popular culture. Because music has the power to reflect individuality among the marginal, immigrants often express their identity through music. It is important to realize, however, that such social identities only have an objective reality when expressed or performed on a cultural stage with others (Foley 18 1). Additionally, a gap still exists between live experience and the false ideals of popular culture.

When looking at popular culture in American society, it is necessary to understand how basic values are learned and transmitted through the portrayal of the dominant culture as the insider and how the portrayal of alternative cultures are delineated as the other. The representation of dominant and master narratives in popular cultural practices and the media reinforce the marginality of ethnic minorities while reproducing ideological pictures of

popular culture. Surrounded by images that exclude them, included in images that seem to have no real social power, ethnic communities feel that they never quite exist and never quite vanish (Lipsitz 134).

Although many Mexicans in Adams County have attempted to retain their Mexican ethnicity, a good deal of cultural elements have been transferred through the processes of acculturation and assimilation. Because they have both transcended and transferred various aspects of dominant American culture, these immigrants have been the product of a hybrid identity.

As Stuart Hall explains, Cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as being, belonging as much to the future as to the past. Cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories, but like everything that is historical, cultural identities undergo constant transformation. These identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves, within the narrative of the past (Hall 225)..

By attempting to maintain ethnic expressive cultures and resisting the ideological hegemony of capitalist popular culture, marginalized groups are invariably struggling against dominant ideology and constantly inventing new, counter hegemonic cultural forms influenced by the expression of self through consumption. The distinct cultural practices one finds among groups, often have a material base and are socially constructed in struggle. An ethnic cultures cultural practices are whatever the group invents from their present struggle and from their past (Foley 166). This process of dialogic identity formation among immigrants is interdependent of the shared memories, perceptions and different histories that have formed, and have been formed by, the fragmentary mosaic of American popular culture.

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